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Comments on Synthesis Paper – The Power of Numbers: A Critical Review of MDG targets for Human Development and Human Rights

Congratulations to the team for undertaking a very interesting study—The Power of Numbers. The study aims to shift the focus of the debate on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from whether the MDGs can be achieved to a critical examination of the ways in which the MDG targets/indicators have affected global and national policy priorities and discourse. This focus is welcome. An important issue that the study highlights is that the intended and unintended consequences of setting goals need to be understood.

The study identifies several drawbacks of the MDGs. The main criticisms are:

- The MDGs simplified complex concepts and objectives, such as gender equality and poverty reduction, in terms of simple, measureable outcomes. In so doing, the MDGs transformed the meaning of these objectives.
- Several indicators were not well conceptualized.
- Though the MDGs started out as a monitoring framework to harmonize the reporting on goals at the global level, they soon were viewed as a policy agenda and a development planning framework.
- While the MDGs rightly drew attention to important social priorities that were neglected or severely lagging, they also had the unintended consequence of sidelining or displacing other important priorities and challenges. For example, the goal of universal primary school enrollment took attention away from early childhood and secondary education and the quality of education; the target on significant improvement in the lives of 100 million slum dwellers failed to address the challenges of urbanization; and the hunger target did not address the underlying issue of food security.
- Because the MDGs segmented interconnected elements of poverty reduction, they promoted a fragmentation of policies and vertical approaches to achieving these goals, as opposed to a multi-sectoral approach.
- The MDGs focused on basic needs as opposed to development. Thus, the MDGs did not bring the transformative change in economic, social and political structures that are required for development.

Below are some comments and observations on the study.

One, the study seems to suggest that the MDGs did harm. Yet, the study does not provide rigorous or conclusive evidence to support this claim. If the 11 background papers contain systematic evidence to this effect, it should be presented in the synthesis paper. Also, there are several studies that find that the MDGs had little impact on policies. The current study needs to

explain why its findings are different from those in the literature. Is it because of a more robust methodology, the time period covered, or other factors? In addition, the study needs to do a better job of explaining whether an alternative set of goals/indicators would have been more effective and why.

Two, since the MDGs are not associated with any formal obligations and sanctions for countries, the real power of the MDGs is in mobilizing broad support for these goals. Therefore, the study needs to provide a better analysis of the potential pathways for generating this support. A recent paper (MDGs that Nudge by Varun Gauri) provides some useful insights on this issue. According to the paper, some ways to mobilize support for these or other development goals is to select goals/targets so that they are: cognitively less demanding (psychological salience), more morally compelling (moral salience), and country owned--i.e. anchored in “politically legitimate processes” (political salience). This would suggest that the main focus of the international development community should be on how to leverage the potential mobilizing power of the MDGs, and less focus on the relative strengths of competing goals/targets.

Three, the study seems to overlook a big achievement of the MDGs: Namely, that the MDGs put the fight against poverty at the center of the international development agenda. And progress has been noteworthy, especially the remarkable performance in China, where the poverty rate fell from 60% in 1990 to 12% in 2010. This progress is now fueling more ambitious goals on poverty reduction. As President Kim of the World Bank has said, “It is time to bend the arc of history” and virtually eliminate poverty worldwide. Higher aspirations are also bringing new demands for better data to measure progress, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This brings me to my fourth point, which is about the contribution of the MDGs to the demand for statistics. The MDGs have provided a sharp focus on measuring and monitoring progress on key socioeconomic indicators. Regular, reliable statistics are central for measuring progress, analyzing links between interventions and outcomes, and providing an evidence base for policymaking. Yet Sub-Saharan Africa, the region with the highest incidence of poverty, has serious gaps in its development statistics. From inconsistencies in measurement to outdated methodologies, the problems are immense (Shanta Devarajan, 2012, and Morton Jerven 2013). There is also an outright lack of data. Indeed, more than one-third of the region’s countries have not had a household expenditure survey in the past five years. The MDGs have spurred a much-needed call for a data revolution. It would be good if the study acknowledges this contribution.

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